

TEACH US TRUE RESPECT FOR ALL

My fellow Jamaicans,

I feel obliged as Jamaica's 6th Prime Minister, to send this message during our Emancipence Week.

This year marks 185 years of Emancipation and 61 years of independence, two significant milestones for us as a people, milestones that commemorate freedom from enslavement and the period of our sovereignty as a nation.

On August 1, 1838, a day like no other, our ancestors 'broke into joyous celebrations on hearing the final words of the Emancipation Declaration, affirming their full freedom from slavery,' the glorious freedom that we, their descendants, celebrate. Comments I made twenty-six years ago in our Parliament remain valid today: "Our duty in celebration is to solemnly recall emancipation from chattel slavery, the most sustained and brutal violation of human rights in the history of humankind." The illegal retention by the plantation owners of captured land are scourges which haunt us still as we grapple with the outcome of inequitable land apportionment.

With the lowering of Britain's Union Jack and the hoisting of Jamaica's black, green, and gold flag on August 6, 1962, Jamaicans everywhere felt enormous pride in achieving independence from Britain, knowing we were no longer another colony of any other country whatsoever.

Despite enduring hardships and numerous trials, Jamaicans have accomplished much on the world stage, gifting our nation with beautiful moments of pure joy. Jamaica's athletes, musicians, and artists are among those who have made and continue to make unique contributions to our rich cultural landscape.

During this Emancipence Week, our indomitable Reggae Girls and Sunshine Girls proudly contribute to this outstanding legacy even as our world-beating athletes prepare for Budapest. Many of us can recall moments of immense national pride when our men and women stood tallest on the global stage. We likkle but we tallawah.

Our National Anthem, sung repeatedly from childhood to adulthood at schools, churches, cinemas, national ceremonies, and sporting events, is a staple for Jamaicans. We do not question its importance or its intrinsic worth. We understand and agree that it connects us as Jamaicans. But what does it mean to be a Jamaican, and what do the words of this prayerful song mean to us?

Recently, however, I have become increasingly disturbed as we witness a severe decline in what the second stanza of the anthem implores: 'Teach us true respect for all.' Utterances from some in the political sphere and positions of authority belittle us as a nation and also undermine respect for all. Public respect is rapidly descending to an all-time low. The language used routinely is distasteful, disgraceful, and comments are derogatory. The tone of their delivery is devoid of respect.

Increasingly, the public is made to endure intensely negative public discourse that abuses, demeans, and vilifies others. Instead of mutual respect, a small but vociferous number of our public speakers are consistently mean-spirited and vulgar. This appalling deterioration cannot be allowed to continue without our clear denunciation as “one people out of many.” We dare not remain silent as it cannot be condoned.

Without rebuke, we are failing to live up to our democratic ideals and undermining our country’s ability to achieve its full potential. Undoubtedly, our ancestors on whose shoulders we stand, would be appalled at the ugly and debasing public discourse in recent times. We have let them down.

Open and public speech, whether public deliberation, debate, or dispute, is fundamental to our democratic ideal. Through public dialogue, collectively, we debate options and identify alternative policy options for the public good. Through public discourse, we can challenge decision-makers, demand justification, and hold our leaders accountable. No person or office is exempt from criticism. In doing so, there will inevitably be disagreements. Nevertheless, civility and respect must be maintained.

Crudity reduces belief in institutional legitimacy, undermines respect for opposing views, and further polarizes our citizens. That, if unchecked or halted, will result in intolerable levels of partisan division and yield dangerous social tension. The startling truth is that it repels and never attracts an increase of political support.

It is not to our benefit as a nation that our citizenry should disengage from public discourse because of the fear of vulgar personal abuse, or reduce the available talent pool from which successive effective leadership will emerge.

The despicable pattern of offensive utterances and vitriolic exchanges will deter rather than entice those idealistic members of the younger generation who aspire to engage in the political arena or render public service.

In this age of advanced technology, comments made in physical spaces are instantly transmitted on social media platforms and spread worldwide.

Our children are watching, hearing, and imitating, as boys and girls are wont to do. How can we impart appropriate values and attitudes to them when such poor examples are set by some in political discourse on matters of national importance? How can we teach them respect when persons whom they should respect fail to show respect to one another?

In our beautiful island home, there is no room for intolerance and disrespect. I implore everyone in the public space to ground arguments in reason and evidence and desist from personal attacks and coarse, offensive speech that destroy the fabric of healthy discourse while serving to undermine the exercise of our hard won democratic freedoms.

We must draw brakes before we pass the brink.

Cho man! We can all do better than dat!

P.J. Patterson

Former Prime Minister

1992-2006